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Seventeenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 348th MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Wednesday, 16 July 1997, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. KHAN

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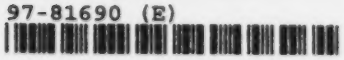

The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

Combined initial, second and third periodic reports of Antigua and Barbuda (CEDAW/C/ANT/1-3) and supplement to the initial, second and third periodic reports (continued)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Akbar and Ms. Tonge (Antigua and Barbuda) took places at the Committee table.

2. Ms. TONGE (Antigua and Barbuda) said that her delegation would endeavour to respond to as many of the questions from Committee members on the presentation of its combined initial, second and third periodic reports and the supplement to those reports as possible. Those questions which it could not currently answer would be addressed in its next report.

Article 1

3. With its upgrade to Cabinet level, the Directorate of Women's Affairs had gone from a staff of two to a full staffing structure including an Executive Director and Assistant, two project officers, a research officer, and two administrative officers. Its budget allocation for 1996 had declined slightly from the 1995 figure because of structural adjustment, but had been increased again for 1997, for a total of 321,085 East Caribbean dollars. The majority of the budget went to salaries and operating costs, with programme implementation funds coming mainly from outside agencies.

4. The Directorate was not a legislative body, but worked closely with the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs to initiate legislation supportive of the advancement of women. It acted as a catalyst for policies relating to the advancement of women with all Government departments through the identification of focal points. In order to promote policies at the local level, the Directorate convened a monthly meeting with non-governmental organizations, participated in events organized by various interest groups, and produced a quarterly newsletter. It also used both the print and electronic media to report on developments of interest to women.

Article 2

5. With respect to the structure of the national legislative machinery, she said that the structure of the Government was very similar to that of other former British Caribbean territories, with a bicameral legislature. The members of the upper house, or Senate, were appointed by the Governor General, while the lower house was made up of elected members of Parliament. The Senate's main function was to debate, review and approve decisions of the lower house. The President of the Senate was a woman, who served on the National Advisory Council of the Directorate of Women's Affairs.

6. The judiciary was independent of the Government and acted to safeguard constitutional rights and freedoms. Its jurisprudence was modelled on English common law, which could be amended by the legislature. The judiciary was made up of the High Court, which heard civil and criminal cases, the Magistrate Court, which heard civil matters involving claims not greater than EC$7,500 and conducted preliminary inquiries to determine whether a matter should be referred to the High Court, and the Industrial Court, which dealt with industrial matters. Appeals from the High Court and the Industrial Court could be heard in the Eastern Caribbean Court of Appeal, with the ultimate right of appeal to the Privy Council.

7. In its effort to encourage women to reach higher positions in the workplace, the Directorate had organized management training programmes and workshops, which had led to the formation of a professional women's support organization. A mentoring scheme for women was also being considered. Women's non-governmental organizations had always played a major role in promoting the advancement of women. In fact, the Directorate of Women's Affairs itself had been established as a result of lobbying by the Women's Action Group of the Antigua Labour Party.

Article 3

8. The draft model law on equal opportunity of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) was currently under consideration as the basis for Antigua and Barbuda's own Equal Opportunity Act. Areas covered in addition to discrimination in the workplace included trade authorities, professional organizations, vocational training, qualifying bodies, employment agencies and service providers. The draft also addressed discrimination in job advertising and application forms. Additional aspects might be introduced into the draft to meet local needs, as well.

9. The Divorce Act had been passed in March 1997 but had not yet taken effect. Under the new Act, one of the duties of the courts was to see that reasonable support arrangements were made for the children of the marriage. Either or both spouses could be ordered to pay a lump sum or to make periodic payments, and also to provide maintenance to the other spouse. Either spouse or other individuals could petition the court for custody of the children of a marriage. The new Act did not cover the disposition of property, which was currently dealt with in the Married Women's Property Act.

10. With regard to the organizational structure of the Directorate, she said that the Executive Director reported to the Permanent Secretary of Parliament, the highest-ranking member of the civil service, who in turn reported directly to the Prime Minister. Within the Directorate, the Assistant Director, the Programme Officers and the Research Officer would report directly to the Executive Director. The Executive Director also reported monthly to the Advisory Committee, a 12-member independent body made up of representatives of non-governmental organizations and civil society, which advised the Directorate on policy issues and monitored and evaluated its work.

11. The Directorate's main objective was to support and initiate efforts to improve the situation of women and empower them through training and education.

Essentially, its work was to spearhead, implement and monitor development plans for women through advocacy, education, personal development, research, the promotion of public awareness on gender issues and training. The Plan of Action referred to earlier was the National Plan of Action proposed by the Government.

Article 4

12. The National Five-Year Development Plan had a component on women that was limited in scope and would be revisited to integrate gender into the development process. When the focus had been on women and development, the Directorate had concentrated on traditional projects designed specifically for women, but in response to changes in the international agenda since the Beijing Conference it had shifted its emphasis to gender and development.

Article 5

13. With regard to stereotypes in the educational system, it had recently been realized that the socialization of boys and girls within the home and wider society had a powerful influence on their choice of traditional skills even when they were offered a wider range of options. Within the school system, boys still had greater exposure to technical skills and girls to domestic skills.

14. Ms. AKBAR (Antigua and Barbuda) said that plans were in place for gender training for teachers, students and the media as part of the preparations for implementation of the Gender Management System. For the most part, the management of such programmes was the responsibility of the Directorate. The 24-hour crisis hotline would begin operation on 1 August 1997. Plans for its management included a management committee comprised of members of society and the Executive Director. The hotline would have its own resources and staff, but the Directorate would be responsible for gaining access to funds for the first two years of its operation, after which it should become self-sustaining. It would be operated by trained volunteer counsellors, who could refer victims to appropriate agencies. The programme also included support services (a victim support group), a domestic violence education and awareness component and a legal reform group to review existing legislation and organize a women's legal literacy programme. A team of legal experts would offer free legal advice to victims. In Antigua and Barbuda, as in many developing countries, there were deficiencies in the statistical data available; gender-disaggregated statistics on violence would be provided in the next report.

15. Since passage of the 1995 Sexual Offences Act, 15 cases had been brought, 10 had reached the courts, and 7 had been successfully prosecuted.

16. The media had a powerful role to play in changing attitudes towards and stereotypes of women's roles. Very good coordination existed between the Directorate and the media in promoting its programmes.

Article 7

17. Promoting women in decision-making roles in both the public and private sectors and the judiciary was a priority of the Directorate. Later in 1997 it would begin a programme including political, motivational, management and

assertiveness training, classes in public speaking and workshops on the structure of Government for women in both the public and private sectors.

Article 8

18. The 19 women holding international posts included a Consul, a Minister Counsellor, two Counsellors, a First Secretary and administrative and ancillary staff. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was headed by the Minister, who was also the Prime Minister. Directly responsible to the Minister were two Permanent Secretaries, followed by Ambassadors and High Commissioners in the hierarchy. The Permanent Mission to the United Nations consisted of a Deputy Permanent Representative, followed by a Minister Counsellor, a Counsellor, First and Second Secretaries and Attachés.

Article 9

19. Although no woman had yet been nominated to public office, women had been appointed to the posts of President of the Senate, Speaker of the House and Parliamentary Secretary Responsible for Women's Affairs. The Directorate would undertake training workshops in lobbying for non-governmental organizations, in response to the CARICOM Plan of Action prepared at the Fourth World Conference on Women, which included the establishment of a lobbying group comprised of prominent women from the region. Although official quotas for women's participation in public affairs had not been set, at the November 1996 Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, it had been generally agreed that all Commonwealth Governments would set such quotas. Endorsement of the recommendation was expected at the October 1997 meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government, which should result in speedy implementation.

Article 10

20. No statistics were available on the drop-out rate among girls or on the prevalence of teenage pregnancy. Because of cultural and religious attitudes, views were divided on the right of pregnant teenagers to continue their education. A planning committee consisting of health-care workers, educators, church and social workers and family planning officers had been established to develop a policy to address the issue, with support from United Nations agencies and international organizations. The Directorate of Women's Affairs offered a programme allowing pregnant teenagers, as well as young mothers who had had to discontinue their education owing to early pregnancy, to continue their studies. The programme provided training in functional literacy, job skills, parenting skills, family life education (including family planning) and HIV/AIDS education.

21. Girls did not usually drop out of school because of household obligations; early pregnancy was more likely to be the cause. Girls were encouraged to attend school and expected to perform well, and generally outperformed boys in primary- and secondary-school examinations. In fact, concerns had arisen as to the impact on boys of the current focus on girl children. The socialization of children, however, tended to perpetuate gender stereotypes, and the media portrayed women in a sexist fashion; most programmes came from North America,

but locally produced programmes were not much better in terms of their portrayal of women.

22. The country's comparative literacy rate was estimated at 88.7 per cent. In the 1992/93 session, overall female enrolment in primary and secondary schools, Antigua State College, the University of the West Indies School of Continuing Studies and the Hotel Training School had been 51 per cent. No girls over the age of 20 were currently enrolled in primary or secondary school. Career counselling and vocational guidance covering a wide range of career opportunities were provided by the Ministry of Education, the Directorate of Women's Affairs and the Soroptimist International Association. Education in government schools was free of charge, though the system's financing relied in part on an education levy imposed on all workers.

Article 11

23. The retirement age for civil servants was 60. Under the Social Security Act, anyone who made social security payments was entitled to receive a pension at the age of 60. In the private sector, the retirement age was usually also 60.

24. Although Antigua and Barbuda had not ratified International Labour Organization Convention No. 100, discussions on the possibility of doing so were under way and the principles of that Convention were being observed. Charges for public childcare facilities were minimal compared to private facilities. The Ministry of Education provided financial assistance in the form of free lunches, and the United Nations World Food Programme provided technical assistance and training. Women were organized in trade unions and made up 65 per cent of the organized labour force. The General Secretary of the Antigua Trades and Labour union was a woman.

Article 12

25. It was not possible to include HIV/AIDS patients in the Medical Benefits Scheme because of the high costs associated with their care; any suggestion in that regard would be welcome. Specific data on the number of female doctors, pharmacists and nurses in the country were not available, but the number of female doctors had increased recently and the majority of nurses were women. Drug addiction among women was an area which the Directorate of Women's Affairs intended to investigate and in which it intended to draw up a plan of action.

26. The Medical Benefits Scheme subsidized care and drugs for patients with diseases covered by the Scheme, and provided financial assistance for travel to patients needing treatment that was not available in Antigua and Barbuda. Every employee paid into the Scheme, which was managed by a civil servant who reported to a Board of Directors consisting of members of civil society; the Board was directly accountable to the Minister of Health. The Medical Benefits Scheme did not cover the cost of contraception.

27. In relation to the increase in HIV/AIDS, the Directorate of Women's Affairs was working with the AIDS Secretariat to promote educational programmes and was represented on the Committee of that Secretariat. The AIDS Secretariat also

supported the Directorate's programme for teenage mothers. The Directorate had a comprehensive programme for victims of domestic violence that included collaboration with the Health Care Services programme and provided for the treatment of victims of domestic violence free of charge. A training programme in that area for health care professionals had been proposed. With respect to cancer detection and prevention, Pap tests were provided to women free of charge. On the occasion of International Women's Day in 1997, the Directorate had organized a women's health fair. It hoped to continue to carry out health education programmes in collaboration with the Ministry of Health.

Articles 13 and 14

28. Although it was usually difficult for women to offer collateral to secure loans, the Government's measures to encourage agricultural development, which had declined with the rise of the tourist industry, provided cost-free parcels of land and duty-free concessions on agricultural equipment to individuals willing to engage in agriculture. However, women often engaged in agriculture on a part-time basis only, owing to their multiple responsibilities. Other loan programmes were available through national banks and other lending institutions, such as the National Development Foundation, most of whose borrowers were women.

Article 14

29. Currently, there was no global policy concerning rural women. A network of clinics provided rural women with medical attention, prenatal and post-natal care and other health services, including family planning and emergency care.

Article 16

30. Under the laws of Antigua and Barbuda, women had the same inheritance rights as men. The Status of Children Act did not differentiate between male and female children or between children born in or out of wedlock, and the Married Women's Property Act gave married women the same rights as single women to acquire real or personal property. In cases of divorce or legal separation, the welfare of the children of the marriage was the paramount consideration. Mothers and fathers had equal rights to apply to the courts in respect of any matter concerning the custody of or access to their children. Both could have joint custody and joint or proportional financial obligations to provide maintenance. In the case of common-law unions, the welfare of the children was still the governing principle.

31. Ms. ABAKA said that she was pleased that the participants in the last Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs had proposed that all member States should set quotas for women's participation in politics, especially since a backlash against such participation was apparent in some countries which had served as role models in that area. She hoped that the heads of State of the Commonwealth countries would adopt the proposal, since it would represent a step forward in the area of women's access to decision-making power.

32. Ms. BERNARD said that the report and presentation had been remarkably good, considering that Antigua and Barbuda was a small island State plagued by

difficulties in data-keeping and a shortage of personnel to compile and present information. She hoped that the country's next report to the Committee would reflect an increased rate of women's high-level representation in Parliament.

33. The CHAIRPERSON said that she welcomed the current Government's increased attention to issues affecting women, demonstrated by the Prime Minister's declaration, immediately after his election, of his intention to redress inequalities in power-sharing between women and men at the highest levels of policy-making. Since the Constitution banned sex discrimination, any individual could bring complaints of such discrimination before the courts, in line with the provisions of the Convention. She hoped that the Equal Opportunity Act would be introduced without delay and that its scope would be expanded to cover the full range of women's rights. The adoption of the 1995 *Sexual Offences* Act was a welcome development. She hoped that the bills on domestic violence, equal pay and women's employment would be adopted and implemented in the near future. Also welcome were the efforts to sensitize health and law-enforcement officials to the issue of violence against women.

34. The need for effective enforcement of the laws, the overemphasis on women's reproductive role and women's absence from national policy-making bodies were of concern to the Committee. Given the high percentage of women in the formal labour market, affirmative action could give more women access to senior managerial posts. The country's national development plan was welcome, but should be expanded to ensure wider integration of the gender perspective. In the area of health, more measures were needed with respect to teenage pregnancy, the conflict between law and practice with respect to abortion and recognition of women's reproductive rights as part of their fundamental human rights.

35. Nonetheless, the Government of Antigua and Barbuda was clearly committed to the advancement of women and had made commendable efforts despite economic and social barriers and the country's status as a developing and newly independent State. The Committee looked forward to the Government's adoption of effective measures to ensure the full implementation of the Convention.

The meeting rose at 11.45 a.m.